

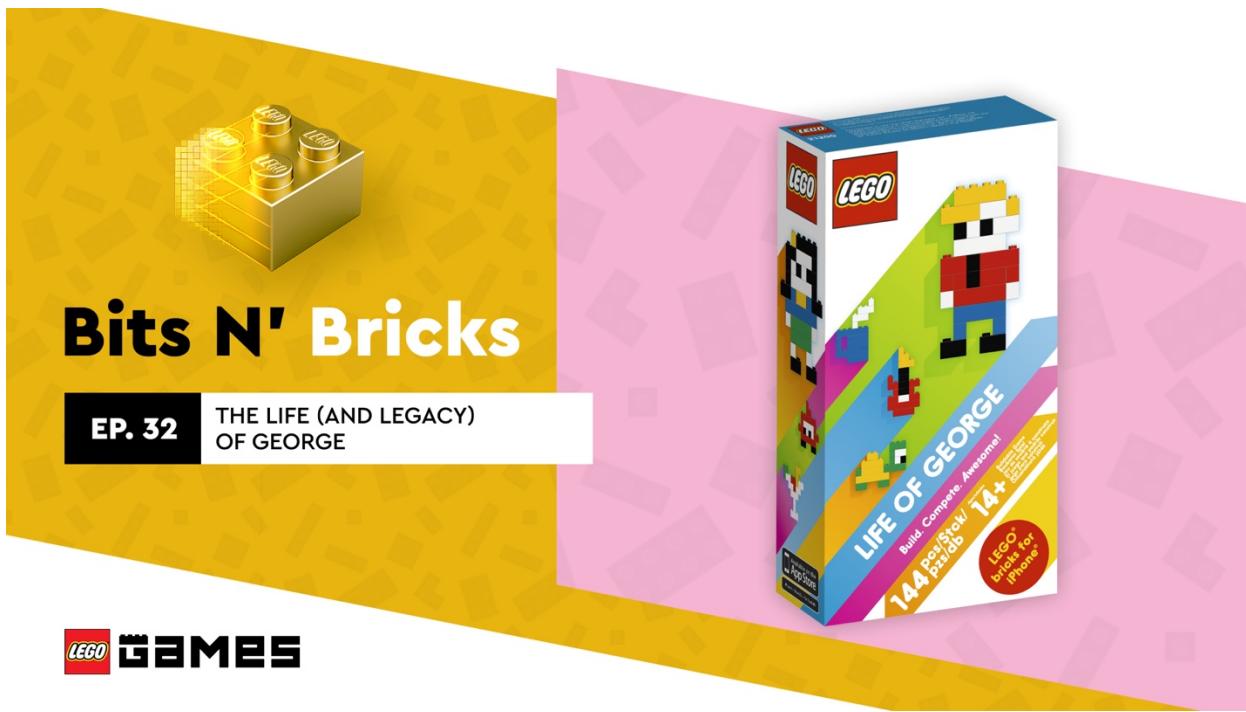
The Life (and Death) of George

The colorful, globe-trotting LEGO® brick puzzle game Life of George may have never happened if it weren't for an Israeli defense contractor unhappy with his lot in life.

As the story goes, Ronen Horovitz co-founded EyeCue, a leading vision tech company, after his wife asked him why he was using his expertise for the tech industry and not for the greater good.

Two years later, Horovitz made a goal for himself to show off his vision technology to the top 10 toy companies in the world.

A short demo to the LEGO Group led to a meeting in 2010 between Horovitz and Paal Smith-Meyer, who worked at the LEGO Future Lab.



"I met Ronen Horovitz at a hotel in Boston where he introduced me to this new technology he had for capturing 3D objects," Smith-Meyer said. "He developed something where he could capture 3D LEGO bricks."

While the demo went off without a hitch, it also reminded Smith-Meyer of another take on the tech that the LEGO Group played around with a decade earlier. In that case, it was the never launched Kidpad, which was designed to allow children to tap Duplo toys onto a pad and transfer them into a computer game.

The Kidpad's failure, which Smith-Meyer thought had a lot to do with the inability to switch back and forth between a computer game and physical toys, made him wary of this new technology in its present form.

But he liked the concept, which was using a webcam and computer, so he challenged Horovitz to see if he could do the same thing with an iPhone.

Three months and a \$20,000 investment from the LEGO Group later, and Horovitz managed to transfer the tech to an iPhone. The new demo blew Smith-Meyer away.

"It was an app that could do one thing," he said. "So basically, you build a few bricks together in 2D, so it's one-by bricks, and you attach them to this purple plate, and then you raise your iPhone, and as soon as the camera looked at it, it said 'plink,' and the object he would appear on the screen."

For Smith-Meyer, the experience was revelatory.

"When I heard that plink, I was like, 'Oh my God, this is amazing! Imagine what you can now do!'"

The meeting ended with Horowitz heading back to Israel, optimistic that his company's technology could power a new LEGO brick experience. Smith-Meyer, for his part, went on his summer holiday, but he couldn't stop thinking about the potential of the technology. He was so captivated, he ended up whipping up a concept for a game he called Brick It, which basically had players building geometric shapes with flat LEGO elements on a pad and then scanning them to get a score based on accuracy and speed.

It was a simple experience, but it was also compelling to everyone who tried it. It was such a solid idea that it was greenlit for a potential March 2011 launch, and a small team began working on turning the prototype into an experience.

A presentation to the company's investment board reaffirmed that the experience was worth pursuing. It was even seen as a game that could potentially crack a problem the company had been struggling with: defining the role of virtual experiences in a company so focused on the physical.

Everyone involved, though, felt it was important to get Apple onboard with the concept. They all saw it not just as an opportunity for the LEGO Group, but one that could underscore the potential of the iPhone.

The team managed to wrangle a meeting with Apple in London, where those present also liked the concept. But they felt it was missing an essential spark of creativity.

Fortunately, Cynthia Bodin, who had been brought on to the project as a designer was – at the same time the meeting was going on – worrying over the same issue.

"When I got the prototype, I thought it was kind of cold," she said. "I started thinking that the best way to actually bring emotions to the concept was to create a character."

Bodin tinkered around with a pile of flat bricks and eventually came up with a little flat chap, neatly dressed and smiling.

"I was trying different iterations," Bodin said, "and when I was happy with him, I showed him to a colleague of mine, and he said, 'Oh, that's George,' and that's how George was born."

Bodin's decision to give Brick It a personality – to take a pile of bricks and a flat grid and turn it into the towheaded, brick-eyed George – didn't just give the game personality and solve Apple's challenge even before the team visiting London returned to Denmark, it also led to a nickname for Bodin: Mother of George.

Once he was created, Bodin decided to give George a bit of an everyman life and tie that to the game.

So now George, his everyday life, and his travels, became the glue that held the game's different challenges together.

The result: a game that tasked players with recreating objects from George's adventures using flat tiles, as quickly as possible.

To bring a bit more personality to George and his hobbies, the team created a Facebook page under the name I Love Numbers because, according to Smith-Meyer, George is a bit of a nerd.

Soon Bodin and the rest of the small team found themselves managing George's Facebook page and even responding to the emails he received on his personal email account.

George's Facebook page launched in May 2011, a bit before the Life of George did. So when the game hit in September 2011, some people were already aware of George.

Empowered by the reaction to Life of George, the team wanted to take the experience – in particular, the technology – and expand it into different game genres. Initially, that meant creating expansions for Life of George itself. The first was a sort of Japanese game show for the app where players had to spin a wheel on their phone to get new challenges.

To really dig into the potential concepts and explore new opportunities with the technology, the LEGO Group partnered with developer Funcom.

Funcom looked at the tech behind Life of George and put a pitch together about three other games. One was for a game that would have players creating flat fish designs which could be scanned and then brought to life in a fish tank on your phone. Another was called LEGO Elements, and was essentially Minecraft designed for a tablet, but with the addition of the ability to scan flat buildings and extrude them into the 3D world of the game on your device. The third was a town planner that melded the idea of constructing building facades to scan into a virtual city with the planning elements of a game like SimCity.

The team then prioritized the three projects and set to work on fleshing them out for the LEGO Group.

"We got shipped six massive boxes of LEGO bricks of all the different kinds of sets they had because they wanted that immersion so that we could really get into that creative thinking," said Matthew Zoern, the executive producer at Funcom Canada at the time. "We started breaking up the project – figuring out what the core game loop was and how we were going to engage users."

As the projects took form, the team was sure all three would become games. Fish Tank, though, was the top priority because everyone on the team thought it was such a strong idea. The team spent months on research and development, trying to work through some of the problems created by scanning a physical 2D model and exporting it into a digital 3D environment.

The team was also finding great success with their work on Elements, achieving the sort of technical outcome that even surprised the higher ups at the LEGO Group, Zoern said.

But one, by one, the projects started to fall through, starting with Fish Tank, which was ultimately shuttered for not being cool enough.

Next came the death of Town Planner and Elements and, not too much later, the shuttering of Funcom's Canada office. Zoern said it all happened seemingly out of the blue. The prototypes were either mothballed or transferred over to TT Games, which was thick in the midst of building popular LEGO adventure titles.

While Funcom was working to expand the ideas behind the technology that drove Life of George, the LEGO Group's Future Lab continued their support of the game, essentially maintaining it. And when the work Funcom was doing transferred over to TT Games, most of the Future Lab folks began working with them on Fusion, the next big project using the technology.

LEGO Fusion, which was released in 2014, seems to blend elements of two of Funcom's early prototypes to deliver an experience that has players building out facades that can then be imported into a LEGO city on a tablet.

But the birth of Fusion brought with it the death of George.

Another Funcom project that saw new life – but not as a published game – was Fish Tank. It was resurrected and redesigned to become a key interactive exhibit at the LEGO House in Denmark.

Life of George was more than just a fun-loving, globe-trotting everyman who urged people to play with small piles of bricks. He was also a pivotal moment in the world of LEGO Games, in particular the LEGO Group's exploration of fluidly moving between the physical and digital in play.

Smith-Meyer, who was so inspired during that first meeting back in 2009, thinks that in some ways, the biggest lesson to glean from Life of George has nothing to do with the technology that empowered it.

"For me," he said, "it was a reminder about how creative you can be with a few bricks."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Kidpad](#) – How the LEGO Group Blends the Physical and Digital to Create New Forms of Play

[Life of George](#) – YouTube

[EyeCue](#) – Official website

[Funcom](#) – Official website

[Fish Designer](#) – Official website

[The LEGO House](#) – Official website

[LEGO Fusion](#) – Brickipedia

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 3 Episode 32: The Life (and Legacy) of George

September 8, 2021 • 39:22



Prologue – 00:00

Announcer

Please note that this episode of Bits N' Bricks contains instances of misuse of the LEGO trademark, which must always be used as an adjective and never a noun. As a reminder, it is never appropriate to refer to the company that designs and produces LEGO brand products as LEGO. Rather, the correct name for the company overall is the LEGO Group.

Announcer

I hope that was severe enough. Was it severe enough?

Studio Engineer

Yeah, that was great, Ben. We got it.

Announcer

Alright. On with the show.

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:38

Ethan Vincent

Welcome to Bits N' Bricks, a podcast about all things LEGO Games. I'm Ethan Vincent.

Brian Crecente

And I'm Brian Crecente. Together, we look back at the rich 25-year history of LEGO Games, chat with early developers and seasoned studios, who have all tackled the creation of video games for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world – the LEGO Group.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 3 theme music)

Brian Crecente

Hey, Ethan.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, how's it going?

Brian Crecente

Good. I know, I bet people would be so jealous to hear that you are currently traveling.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, I am. I recently traveled with my daughter to the U.S. where she'll be attending high school four years. So it's pretty exciting at the moment for her.

Brian Crecente

And, most importantly, you got to fly to go there. Travel. Man, I really miss travel.

Ethan Vincent

True, true. I think a lot of people are feeling that way. And I think both of us used to travel a lot more back in the day, right Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, and you know who else also loves to travel, Ethan?

Ethan Vincent

I do not know.

Brian Crecente

George.

Ethan Vincent

Talk about strange segues.

Brian Crecente

I'd rather talk about the Life of George, the fun little smartphone game that hit mobile phone stores back in 2011, along with cool guy, snappy dresser, 2D George and his desire to get you to build things quickly with flat pieces of LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

OK, let's do this.

(Tune plays)

Chapter 1: EyeCue – 02:21

Brian Crecente

Before there was Life of Georg, or even a George, or even a puzzle game, there was an Israeli tech company on the hunt for a creative partner. Formed in 2007, EyeCue is a leading tech company in Israel that specializes in creating custom vision recognition solutions for toys and games. Ronen Horovitz co-founded the company after working in the defense industry. The story goes that one day his wife asked him why he was using his expertise for the defense industry instead of trying to create something for the greater good. So he got this idea to use the tech to enhance play, and in 2009, he made a goal for himself: to introduce his vision tech to the top 10 toy companies in the world.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. So he's out there making the rounds, talking to all the big toy companies and manages to grab a meeting with the LEGO Group at their offices in Connecticut. The people there were so taken with the tech they directed Ronen to Paal Smith-Meyer, who was the head of the LEGO Group's new business group at the time. His job was to bring new ideas to the market. So Ronen emails Paal in November 2009, and the two end up meeting in Boston in March 2010.

Paal Smith-Meyer

He was going to introduce me to this new technology he had for capturing 3D objects. And he had developed something where he could capture 3D LEGO bricks. Watching the demo he had was kind of awkward for me. It was a deja vu back to KidPad 10 years earlier, because what he showed was a web camera attached to a computer, which could recognize bricks. And what I knew was that playing in front of a computer is not a good play experience. Kids are not able to separate like when to look at the screen or when to look at the physical bricks. But I thought it was really cool what he could do so I asked him at that moment, "Are you able to use this technology on an iPhone?" which I had just gotten. And he was like, "I don't know." So, that was really the task from our first meeting in Boston, was for him to go back to Israel and experiment with how to capture LEGO bricks on an iPhone.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

Now, we've talked about the KidPad before in this podcast. It's the amazing bit of tech that would have had players use Duplo toys and a plastic pad to interact with the computer game, but it never came to market.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, that's right. It ended with a jar full of pig's feet and a studio shutting down.

Brian Crecente

That is a story for another time – one you, dear listeners, should check out in the second episode of this podcast about the LEGO Group's pursuit of Fluid Play. But back to Paal and Ronen.

Paal Smith-Meyer

So when I gave him the challenge in March of 2010, to see if we can actually capture LEGO bricks on the iPhone, he replies a little bit later having returned to Israel and says, "It will take me \$20,000 and three months." So before the summer holiday, he returns to Billund and introduces me to his first prototype. And it's kind of funny because he has spray painted a makeup stand in purple and glued a 32 by 32 LEGO brick plate onto it, also sprayed in purple. And the iPhone he gives me has only one app installed. And it's an app that can do one thing. So basically, you build a few bricks together in 2D, so it's one-by bricks, and you attach them to this purple plate, and then you raise your iPhone, and as soon as the camera looked at it, it said "pling" and the object, most of the time, would appear on the screen. And when I heard that "pling," I was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing. Imagine what you can now do." And I think I was probably one of the few people who started then imagining that this could actually be the future of a new way of playing with LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

Excited about this new concept, Paal quickly realizes that 2D capture is the best approach for a simple pick-up-and-play experience.

Paal Smith-Meyer

It's actually OK that we start with capturing basic colors in 2D, because that's also how computer games started. It's like more pixel experience. And it's also easier to create things and quicker to create things if it's more stacking than thinking 3D.

Ethan Vincent

The meeting ended with Ronen heading back to Israel, optimistic that his company's technology could power a new LEGO brick experience. Paal, for his part, went on his summer holiday, but he couldn't stop thinking about the potential of the technology. He was so captivated by the tech, he ended up whipping up a concept for a game he called Brick It, which basically had players building geometric shapes with flat LEGO elements on a pad and then scanning it to get a score based on accuracy and speed. Once he got back from his break, he reached out to Ronan.

Paal Smith-Meyer

I sent him an email with all my notes written probably in Notes on the iPhone. And immediately him and Ronen, and two other guys in his team, they started working on this. They thought it's really cool. And they were set to deliver a prototype of the game in the fall. So after a few months, back and forth, they return again with actually a prototype of the game. So we started playing this, and everything we had was then at the time, abstract shapes. So it wasn't actually figures. It was more like geometric shapes, cool patterns. And I thought that was really cool. So the Brick It game experience was pretty simple. You had the physical LEGO bricks in different colors, and one-by-two, one-by-three, one-by-four. And you got different shapes on the screen when you started a game. And then you had to build that shape and the pattern in form and color. And there was a timer, and the timer went tick, tick, tick, tick, tick tick, which really creates a distress experience like a game show. And you had to build and complete the model before the time ran out and place it on the mat, which was this 2D printed mat on the table, and then lift your phone and the phone will automatically scan the model, and it would say, "pling" and when the pling came, you got a score. So that score was based on, was the bricks you put together accurate? And the time you spent.

Chapter 2: Apple – 08:48

Brian Crecente

Work on the game proceeded through the winter with Paal bringing in the rest of the new business group team including Cynthia Bodin and Mikkel Holm as well as starting work with an in-house agency.

Paal Smith-Meyer

We were trying to figure out "How do we communicate this? What kind of box is it?" We were looking a lot about, like in retro gaming and going back to the nostalgia of like the 8-bit gaming. So that was kind of the route we were taking and saying, "The first game experience will define the future of this type of play." And we presented them our strategy for launching this in March of 2011 to our investment board, which was Mads Nipper, Key Euler, Lisbeth Valther Palleson. And at the time, we had also been thinking of the go to market strategy saying, the place we should really be with this experiences in the Apple Store because this experience really showcases the Apple technology in a good way, and the LEGO bricks possibilities of creativity. So we set ourselves a challenge of actually bringing this product to market and into the Apple Stores from March to September.

Brian Crecente

Not only did the investment board like the idea for Brick It, they also thought it could be a game that could crack a problem the company had been struggling with: defining the role of virtual experiences in a company so focused on the physical.

Paal Smith-Meyer

So the reaction from the investment board at the time was that, "Wow this is actually pretty cool. Even though it's two dimensional brick building, it really showcases a way of focusing creativity, both physically and in the screen." And that was really our vision to say, "We need to find a new play pattern that can be repeated over and over and over again in future experiences." And that was really to define: what is the role of building physical LEGO bricks? And what is the role of the virtual experience? So once those bricks are captured, what do you do? And how does the virtual experience inspire or challenge you to build again? Because we wanted this continuous flow of build, and then to play, and then to go back to be inspired to build more. And we thought that that would kind of – if we cracked that code, this could be a real kind of – we could develop products for the next 10 years.

Ethan Vincent

After getting the thumbs up from the investment board, the next step for the team was getting it in front of Apple. The team knew they needed to get the iPhone creator on board because they felt the experience was a great way to highlight the phone's own technology, alongside the fun and creativity of LEGO brick building. Eventually, Holm found a contact through LinkedIn, who headed up sales at Apple in Europe, and they managed to set up a meeting. Unfortunately, things didn't go exactly as expected.

Paal Smith-Meyer

And we played the game, they got to play the game. And they thought, "This is really cool. This is actually – this is the type of product we're looking for because it's innovative, it's creative, and it really showcases our product in a good way." They gave us one challenge though. At the end of the meeting they said, "This Brick It is very abstract. It's very cool, but what if it had a story around it? What if it was more emotional, something that people could attach to?" And that, you know, stuck in the head and sitting on the plane back home, like hmm, yeah, what can we do because we were so focused on like, you know, the purism of the LEGO experience. It was about the bricks and shapes, and no story. Just very clean.

(Short tune)

Chapter 3: Mother of George – 12:20

Brian Crecente

While Paal and his team were flying their way over to London for a sit-down with Apple and ultimately, that bit of creative pushback, Cynthia Bodin was worrying over Brick It. She had been assigned to the project as a designer, and while she liked the concept, she felt the design itself was, well, a little bit cold.

Cynthia Bodin

I got to think that the best way to actually bring emotions to the concept was to build a character, to create a character, so I just got to play around with bricks and try to use as little amount of bricks as possible, but still have something that looks like a human. So after like trying different iterations, then I came around with George, who was just a nameless figure, but then when I got him and I was happy with him, I just showed him to my colleague, Mikkel, and he directly said, "Oh, George" so that's how George was born.

Brian Crecente

That decision to give Brick It a personality – to take a pile of bricks and flat grid and turn it into the towheaded brick-eyed George – didn't just give the game personality and solve Apple's challenge, even before the team visiting London returned to Denmark, it also led to a nickname for Cynthia: Mother of George.

Cynthia Bodin

Yes, that's because I created George.

Brian Crecente

But George wasn't always going to be a flat, tie-wearing businessman, Cynthia said she also played around with other designs like little aliens or monsters. But once she settled on a human for the design, her choices for George's look were slightly constrained by the limitations of the brick set that would ship with the game. She also decided to give him a bit of an everyman life.

(Excerpt from LEGO Life of George game: "Friend, George wants you to build, scan, score!")

Cynthia Bodin

I basically found the concept of having George being a character with a very busy and real life. And I went on developing the rest of the models, all the models that you see when you're playing the game. And I went from developing, with the other designers, the different levels in the game. So creating a story, a little stories, some little chapters of what's happening to George really, and the reason why there were all those models inside was because George was traveling the world, and he would just take photos of all the things that he was seeing, but there's some mundane everyday things, and things that he would see during his travels. The idea was to have this really, really simple game with this simple mechanic where the smartphone is the game master, and you playing against the clock, you need to build as fast as possible the little model that you see on the photo album, and then, you know, hold your phone and then it recognizes the model – is it correct or not? And how long time does it take you to build that model? So that was sort of like the premise, but then I was thinking, "OK, what kind of models do we build and why?" So then we needed to create those different chapters. And George was about – yeah, it

was about his life, and he also had a, you know, a girlfriend and like different friends around him. And then – so we went on and on just like, creating different chapters and different stories. And some of the stories were a little crazy, but like, we didn't really care on how crazy it was. But I went really deep in creating his life and all the things – yeah, behind-the-scenes that we've never really talked about. We never really talked about openly, you know, what is his job? So his job is actually a computer engineer, and then he's a little shy on the introverted side, and then all the things inside that came after.

Chapter 4: The Life of a Facebook Page – 16:31

Ethan Vincent

To bring a bit more personality to George and his hobbies, the team created a Facebook page under the name I Love Numbers. Because, according to Paal, George is a bit of a nerd. Soon, Cynthia, and the rest of the small team found themselves managing George's Facebook page and even responding to the emails he received on his personal email account.

Cynthia Bodin

Yes! Yes there were! Like so many people. I was – yeah, in that way, I was really surprised that people wanted to know more about George. They wanted to know his life, and they were really playing along, that game. And yeah, that's, that's what I love. Even got an Instagram page, later on Instagram accounts. That like really puts an emphasis on George himself, what he was up to. We created some competitions and like, really like a way to engage people, as a community, around their love for George. I even got, I remember, I got people telling me, "You know, when I'm having a hard day, I just think of George and play with the game, and he puts a smile on my face." For me, as a designer, it's the biggest, biggest compliments that you can hear.

Ethan Vincent

Paaul said all of this backstory and personality were sort of created on the fly.

Paal Smith-Meyer

So the fun thing with how George and his whole universe came about was really that it started with George, started with a character, and the naivety of these 2D characters. And we didn't sit down and write the whole story bible of his whole background. We just started playing around with the story. And it became kind of a live narrative that evolved as we went, and we met new people. We started working with Hello Monday, which was the communication team that developed the visual universe. And it just grew. We launched a Facebook page with George on it. And so what do you fill the Facebook page with is really your life, the things that happen. So after our normal day job was over, Mikkel and me would get online again and start pondering like, what should George post today? What has

he been up to? And sometimes it was like us having filmed at the factory or the times it was development. But everything was secret, you know, we started very early before launch. And this was his secret project. It was like Life of George was his invention. And yeah, so if I had other people review them, I had the funny commentaries back to me, so I used some of that also baked into the narrative, like you're too creative George.

Brian Crecente

The Facebook page launched in May 2011. A bit before the Life of George did. So when the game hit in September 2011, some people were sort of already aware of George. Paal said he was on a flight to Helsinki when the game went live.

Paal Smith-Meyer

And when I landed and turned my phone back on and checked, googled Life of George, there was a lot of articles because we had an embargo for the PR, and suddenly there was a lot of news about the Life of George, this new experience from the video and everything. So it was really exciting. So one of the big features in Life of George is really like each level was a destination. So it was like his travel postcards from around the world or things, places he went, or even like from his dreams. So we continue to launch new postcards, so for Christmas, it was the Christmas level. We also added the new multiplayer features. And we also had a really cool feature where people could build their own models, and capture them and turn them into game objects. So our plan for this was really to – we wanted to make Life of George a creative destination where people could just game in his universe. And there was an amazing amount of models that people created with the same 144 bricks that were yellow, blue, green, red, black and white. It was amazing to see the creativity. I think almost every superhero was created by someone. If you look at the set itself, by being so basic is probably one of the best showcases of how much creativity a few bricks can lead.

Ethan Vincent

Empowered by the reaction to Life of George, the team wanted to take the experience, and in particular the technology, and expand it into different game genres. Initially, that meant creating expansions for Life of George itself. The first was a sort of Japanese game show for the app where players had to spin a wheel on their phone to get new challenges. But there were a number of other ideas the team was working on.

Paal Smith-Meyer

One was like an animation studio where you would do basically a stop motion animation, and the great thing with that was the way you could capture 2D meant that by just moving one brick you are always in the grid. So you're always within the LEGO system grid with your creation so you could just move things around. And then we had like, paint paths was a really creative way of animating. And we had the pinball machine game where you built pinball machines in 2D and turn them into 3D. So we had a lot of different, fun gameplay.

Brian Crecente

To really dig into the potential concepts and explore new opportunities with the technology, the LEGO Group decided to partner up with developer Funcom.

Chapter 5: Funcom – 22:16

Ethan Vincent

Founded in 1993 in Oslo, Norway, Funcom is perhaps best known for its work on two massively multiplayer online games: The Secret World, and Age of Conan. But the company also had a studio it opened in 2009 in Canada that did work on midcore and mobile games. It was working with the LEGO Group already on LEGO Minifigures online, and Matthew Zoern, the Executive Producer at Funcom Canada, said it decided to reach out to the LEGO Group's Future Labs to discuss other potential projects. The timing couldn't have been better. Life of George had recently been released, and the LEGO Group asked Funcom to come up with some concepts based around the technology and ideas of Life of George.

Matthew Zoern

I went and met with the team –

Ethan Vincent

This is Matthew Zoern speaking.

Matthew Zoern

– I think around 2012 was my first meeting actually in Billund, where I went and met with the Future Lab team. And we went over – we put a pitch together and we went over and presented it, and from there it was – it just kicked everything off. I think they really liked our approach, you know, the way that we wanted to do things and just our creative kind of approach that meshed with the brand very well. We proposed just a bunch of different games around this idea where you could scan elements and then bring them into the mobile devices. I mean, the Life of George was the perfect foray into using, you know, the mobile devices, and that was opening up a lot of new opportunities, you know, with the camera and with all of these things that everybody had all of these devices now. So it was a really good opportunity to leverage the brand that from Life of George and see what we could do more with that.

Brian Crecente

Matthew said the meeting lasted two or three days and ended with the Funcom group and LEGO Future Lab coming up with three solid ideas: one was for a game that would have players creating flat fish designs which would be scanned and then brought to life in a fish tank on your phone. Another was called LEGO Elements and was essentially Minecraft designed for a tablet, but with the addition of the ability to scan flat buildings and extrude

them into the 3D world of the game on your device. The third was a town planner that melded the idea of constructing building facades to scan into a virtual city with the planning elements of a game like SimCity. Matthew said the team prioritized the three projects and then returned to Montreal to start working on fleshing them out.

Matthew Zoern

I remember we got shipped – what was it? Six, six massive boxes of LEGO bricks of all the different kinds, because they wanted that immersion so that we could we could really get into that that creative thinking so that we could approach all of these different methods. We also took the – just breaking up the project as typical game development, we figured out what's the core game loop, how are we going to engage users, how are we going to keep them involved, what are those different meta mechanics? And just fleshing out the very high level game design based on those ideas that we had come up with, and then put that against our production timelines, production plan, all that stuff, and then basically started that and kicked that into full production, which at that point, then we had people from LEGO, the team, the Future Lab team just coming and spending a lot of time with us, and then we'd do a lot of back and forth. They'd spend some time with us we'd spend some time in Billund.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

As the project began to take form, the team was sure all three would become games. Fishtank, though, was the top priority because everyone on the team thought it was such a strong idea. The team spent months on research and development, trying to work through some of the issues created by scanning a physical 2D model and exporting it into a digital 3D environment. The team was also finding great success with their work on Elements, achieving the sort of technical outcome that even surprised the higher-ups at the LEGO Group, Matthew said. But, one by one, the projects started to fall through, starting with Fishtank.

Matthew Zoern

Like literally, this was the word, you know, it was like, "Oh, this isn't gonna go anywhere. No one wants to play with fish. Fish are boring."

Paal Smith-Meyer

I got a lot of opposition from the rest of the Future Lab team that, you know, fish are not cool.

Ethan Vincent

This is Paal Smith-Meyer speaking.

Paal Smith-Meyer

You know, it's not enough cool, so we actually added like, a lot of coolness to it. But, you know, they – it was so much pushback on doing fish.

Brian Crecente

In an attempt to save the game, Paal worked on adding in other elements to Fishtank like a crab, which didn't seem to have much impact on the naysayers. Next, came the death of Town Planner and Elements. Matthew said it all happened seemingly out of the blue.

Matthew Zoern

So I got a phone call. Because we were like, it was very strange, I remember all of a sudden, no one was talking to us. And everything was great, everybody was there, I mean, literally, like we're probably talking the week before everybody we're doing these brainstorming, we're gonna do all this stuff. And then we're reaching out and we're like, "Where did everybody go?" You know, like, "Why is no one returning our calls? Why is no one reaching back out on our emails?" And I remember we an email saying, "Can we set up a call?" And I was like, "That doesn't sound good, right?" Like not, "Hey, sorry we've been here." Its like, "Can we set up a call?" So it was myself, it was my technical director, the studio manager at the time. I think there was, yeah, maybe three or four of us, and we got on a call with one person, and he took over and he called us and said, "Look, you know, Future Lab is more of a an R&D team that looks at opportunities to, where we can extend the brand, more so into the future kind of play cycles for the brand, and due to this we will no longer be continuing our relationship with you, and all of the work from this point on needs to be handed over to the LEGO Group, which will be continued with TT Games, and Warner." And we're like, "What?" Like, just – yeah, like dropped the hammer. And we were just absolutely beside ourselves. But, you know, I understand it's business at the end of the day, but it was definitely, it was taken very hard. And by everybody that was really invested into this just really felt like we just had the rug pulled out from under us.

(Tune break)

Matthew Zoern

I think it was a combination of things. You know, Funcom at the time, they had gone through a bit of a tough patch with their MMO that they had launched, The Secret World, and they shut down, we had about 200 people, and they basically shut down the Montreal MMO and moved everybody to, or not everybody, who was left to North Carolina and back to Oslo. We were what was left, so the midcore social mobile division was what was left, and we became Funcom Games Canada after that. And so as long as we were bringing in projects and stuff, we didn't really have support, in all honesty, from head office, because I don't think the board wanted to support the studio because it was, really we're just keeping it open at that point, because we had projects and we were successful, but once we started to lose the LEGO brand projects, then that became a reason for them not to

support us. So we never got biz dev support, we never got support from trying to perpetuate it. It was just, you know, they wouldn't let us hire people, they wouldn't let us really do anything. And it just became this attrition scenario where that just compounded everything else, and ultimately, they just didn't want to support it, and they sold it.

Chapter 6: Life After George – 30:06

Brian Crecente

While Funcom worked on expanding the ideas behind the technology that drove Life of George, the LEGO Group's Future Lab continued their support of that app, essentially just maintaining it. And when the work Funcom was doing transferred over to TT Games, most of the Future Lab folks began working with them on the next big project using the technology, Fusion. LEGO Fusion, which released in 2014, seems to blend elements of two of Funcom's early prototypes to deliver an experience that has players building out facades that can be imported into a LEGO City on a tablet. But the birth of Fusion brought with it the death of George.

Paal Smith-Meyer

Life of George ended around when we launched Fusion.

Ethan Vincent

This is Paal Smith-Meyer speaking.

Paal Smith-Meyer

So it faded out. There was no one to carry the legacy of George forward. It was like that was a fun experiment. And there was this notion that also, I think, misunderstood at the time that we launched things to learn. And what we had had as a mantra and new business group was we don't launch to learn, but we launch and then we learn, and then we iterate and we grow. So since this whole technology had become part of the pool of all these other games. There wasn't really anyone who owned the vision of what capture technology should really be used for and it was more like, "OK, let's launch cool stuff and see what happens." Yeah, I think George was forgotten, and if you go into his Facebook page, it's kind of telling the last image there is like, you know, it's like George saying goodbye. He's going on a long holiday. Doesn't know when he's gonna come back. And that was it. I think with that post, it was just like George is over. And I don't think there was a lot of lessons learned, unfortunately, it was more focused on launching something cool. But it was also not really TT Games's. They weren't passionate about this. They did it because of more relationship to the LEGO Group. And then really that they thought that this was the future of LEGO play. Unfortunately also, the team at the time looked at this more as a learning experience, like we launched Fusion, we see what happens, we collect

some learnings and then, that also faded away. So I think like there's time to reintroduce what started with George again, because it was still an amazing experience.

Ethan Vincent

Another Funcom project that saw new life but not a published game was Fishtank. It was resurrected and redesigned to become a key interactive exhibit at the LEGO House in Billund, Denmark. That's something that makes Matthew proud.

Matthew Zoern

That's amazing. I love to hear that because, I mean, honestly, I would love to do that game again. I think that, you know, now with the technology, we could do some crazy stuff that – I mean, because even with that, just going back to the engineering, like there was a lot of things that we needed to develop, because even though it was early in, you know, mobile device lifespan, it was also early for Unity. Unity, we had to actually create our own engine to put bone structures against these characters. Because there was nothing. The only thing that came, I think it was called, I want to say it was called Mecanim, which was this Unity-based humanoid-type bone structure that you could apply dynamically to characters. So we actually had to create different types of bone structures that we would dynamically apply based on the choice that you would pick so, is it a fish? Is it like an eel? Or is it, you know, whatever these things are, and then we animated these different sequences, and then those would get dynamically applied to the 3D extrusion that you scanned. And that took us a long time, like I remember when we first started, the engineers of course, you know, they say like anything else like, "Oh, can't be done, Oh, no, can't be done." But we did it.

Chapter 7: Conclusion – 34:09

Brian Crecente

Life of George wasn't just a fun loving, globe trotting, every man who urged people to play with small piles of bricks. He was also a pivotal moment in the world of LEGO games, in particular, the LEGO Group's exploration of fluidly moving between the physical and digital in play, Cynthia said.

Cynthia Bodin

I think that it was really a big step for us, it was – yeah, in a way, it was the start of a new direction. And I was really not expecting that it would have such an impact because it was such a small project with very few people involved. That's what, in a way, makes it so charming, because then you can have a really have a big impact on the design of everything. It's you, because you're the only person designing it. So yeah, I was very surprised to see that he had such an impact on the project that followed that, and this wish to make more experiences for kids that were just, you know, even more fun than George

for them. I think that was like the first time we were using this brick recognition technology. So this thing was just very new. On the other hand, you know, the whole style of it, like the use of the bricks, and this pixelated style, that was – everything was just so new. So I think that's, yeah, I think that's what actually made it so important for people.

Ethan Vincent

Zoern, whose team at Funcom pushed to extend the Life of George technology, still sees the struggle to marry the worlds of the physical and digital.

Matthew Zoern

You know, I think that there is this huge disconnect between physical and virtual world. And I mean, this was really the key where a lot of the LEGO Future Labs really wanted to make this bridge. And this is what I think really was the key to all of this stuff, that I see even today only starting, where they're starting to integrate physical products with digital goods. We had a team of visionaries that really wanted to change things, and the LEGO Future Labs team wanted to change things, you know, change the way people approach things. And it was such this great marriage of ideas.

Brian Crecente

Paal who had that first meeting in 2009, that so inspired him, thinks that in some ways, the biggest lesson to glean from Life of George has nothing to do with the technology that empowered it.

Paal Smith-Meyer

For me is kind of where I felt that we have forgotten about how creative you can be with a few bricks. Always celebrating, you know, a lot of bricks, a lot of complex model building, but forgetting that, you know, when you're sitting at home, and with a few bricks or your own bricks, like, how do we start triggering you to look at those bricks in new ways? And we need to start simple. And it's gonna go back to Creator in 2001, when we started looking at that, like kind of going back to basics of really showcasing that how awesome basic bricks can be. And that was for me what was genius about Life of George, is that when you look at those bricks in a pile, you see nothing. There's nothing there. But as you said, once you start building with it, and all these things come to life and there's like the Hawaii level with the hula girl and the surfboard and the little drink, and you get all these levels and you go, "Are these from the same bricks?" And I think that it surprised ourselves like, wow, can you actually make this and it looks cool. And I think that's what is important in the LEGO Group to always go back and remind themselves about: Why are we here? It's really to inspire people to create with LEGO bricks. That is the main job.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 38:11

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Disclaimer voice is Ben Ungureanu. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, and excerpts from the game Life of George. We'd like to thank our participants: Cynthia Bodin, Paal Smith-Meyer, and Matthew Zoern. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games team. For questions and comments write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

LEGO, the LEGO logo, the Brick and Knob configurations, and the Minifigure are trademarks of the LEGO Group. © 2021 The LEGO Group.

All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.